மதுரைத் தமிழ்ச் சங்கம்
THE MADURA TAMIL SANGAM

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BHARAT MILAP

FROM THE TAMIL RAMAYANA OF KAMBAN

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Broadcast from the Madras Station of All India Radio in July and August 1954

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सत्यमेव जयते

THE PUBLICATIONS DIVISION
MINISTRY OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

May 1955

Price: 8 annas, or 1 shilling, 15 cents

National Printing Works, Delhi (India).

FOREWORD

Kamban, like Tulsidas, was a Bhakta first and a poet next. No wonder that devotion and piety suffused and permeated his entire work. His poetry is no less attractive. Like Tulsidas, Kamban also seems to have reached the acme of pathos in *Ayodhya Kand.* Rajaji has brought out some of that sublime pathos in his beautiful translation. I have never been able to read *Ayodhya Kand* of Tulsi's Ramayana without tears and Rajaji's translation of Kamban in verse has been equally remarkable.

For one familiar with Tulsidas, it is easy to appreciate the charm, the beauty and sublimity and the life-giving devotion of Kamban, and Rajaji has done a great service by making some portions of that immortal work known to non-Tamilians. Somewhere Tulsidas has said that Rama's name is greater even than Rama himself. It is equally true that Tulsidas and Kamban are greater even than Valmiki. Tulsidas says that Rama incarnate was able to give salvation to but a few but his name remembered and repeated has been the salvation of numberless saints and sinners, and will continue to be so till the end of time. Even so, Valmiki brought Rama home only to those who study and know Sanskrit which, as its very name implies, is the language of the cultured few. Kamban touches the heart and ennobles the mind even of the unlettered. It will be doing a great service if someone were able to render Kamban into Hindi verse and Tulsidas into Tamil verse.

Reading the present translation I felt in many places as if I was reading Tulsidas. The thought, even the expression, was not only similar but the same, although in places the story might have differed. Therein lies India's unity in diversity, hidden but persistent and everlasting.

22nd April, 1955 *Rajendra Prasad*

THE MADURA TAMIL SANGAM

I

The difference between Valmiki and Kamban, or between Valmiki and Tulasidas, is that with the later poet Rama is God at every turn, while in Valmiki though Rama is undoubtedly recognised as an incarnation of Vishnu, yet the treatment of character and incident throughout is only as of a good and valiant prince, and the God-hood is forgotten as it were. By the time Kamban and Tulasi came to sing the Ramayana, Rama had become God Himself and so completely deified for generations with temple and rituals dedicated to His worship that it would have been wholly artificial for Kamban or Tulasi to do as Valmiki did and to tell the story of Rama as just a heroic romance. The men, women and children who were to hear Kamban knew Rama only as God incarnate.

To try to undo the work of ages and to undeify Rama and Krishna in India would be as futile as positively mischievous. In them are rooted our whole living culture, a culture of which we may be proud. We cannot cut off a vital organ and hope to live. Deceived by the glamour of the superstructures let us not shake the foundations of rough-hewn granite on which the house we live in rests. It would be disastrous. India cannot be India without Rama and Krishna.

It may be easy and even more satisfactory to tell the Ramayana in English or French as a story of the Imperial Prince of Ayodhya rather than that of God come down on earth. Such a presentation may read well in the foreign medium. Not so if we tell the story in any of the mother-tongues of the children of India. Imagine re-writing the Bible and converting it into the story of a good and pious young man who obtained a large following by his simple approach to religion, but who was sentenced to death by the official judge at the instance of a jealous group of interested priests of whose disloyalty a weak central government was living in continuous fear. The story would be interesting enough and have its lessons, but it would not be the foundation of Christianity such as it now is as the story of the Son

of God come down to bring the message of compassion and grace to mankind. What might suit a foreign medium would be disastrously inadequate for the people whom the idyll has nursed and sustained for ages as a story of direct divine interest in the affairs of men and as a rock on which their higher life firmly rests. Kamban lived in the times of our Alwars and was one of them, and he sang the story of Rama as God come down on earth to suffer, chasten, uplift, help and guide men. And he has found an honoured place among the great Bhaktas.

Apart from this difference in the treatment of the hero, there is considerable difference in poetic form between Valmiki and Kamban. Kamban's Ramayana is a lyric, while Valmiki's is an epic. The lyric is a string of cut-gems with glittering facets sparkling at each turn. It is not a solemn march of pre-destined sadness as is Valmiki's epic. The lyric sparkle of Kamban and Tulasi goes well with their constant reminder that Rama is the Supreme Being Himself.

The unique characteristic of Tamil verse is the initial rhyme. In good Tamil poetry, unlike the end-rhyme in English or Hindustani, it is not just a purposeless jingle that has become a custom. The initial rhyme in Tamil is a medium of emphasis and climax and it is a remarkably efficient medium. So also the alliteration, which is also an essential in Tamil verse, is not merely an idle sound-repetition but actively aids the enforcement of the thought and imagery contained in the verses. Of course these aids are of no value in unskilled hands and become just jingles. But in Kamban's art, the alliteration is subdued with great care and the rhyme words always go up with mounting quality and are never allowed to deteriorate into a laboured selection out of a thesaurus. They come with a clap of appropriateness on the top of an ascending scale. This quality among many other things distinguishes Kamban from the inferior Tamil poets. The lyric cannot be a lyric without conspicuous economy of words, without sparkle and lilt, and these are Kamban's special characteristics not to speak of the depth of his thoughts, his human understanding and his wonderful poetic imagination.

I cannot in an English rendering bring out the rhyme or the sparkle or the lilt. I can only attempt to do some justice to the wealth of substance and brevity of presentment. The

rendering is almost literal. It may help non-Tamil listeners to have some idea of the quality of Kamban of whom the Tamil people are so justly proud.

The sage Visvamitra presents the Prince of Ayodhya to Janaka, the illustrious philosopher-king, and informs him of his desire that Rama should see the reputed bow of Siva. It was well known that Janaka had sworn to give his daughter away in marriage only to one who bent and strung that bow.

Said the great King to Visvamitra
"My thoughts do run before my words
Oft have I said to myself
Seeing Sita languishing
In fasts and holy vows
I fear this bow may prove
Stronger than my star
And end my life in grief.
May be this prince of yours
May bend and string this bow—
Whereat so many a prince
Has tried and failed before—
And from this sea of grief
May lift me up to shore."

"Go", said the King to the waiting men
"Bring the ancient bow at once
And place it before this noble prince."
"Aye ! our liege" they said
And four of them, they sped
To where the sacred bow
Was kept enshrined.

Dark-haired mammoth men
With heavy locks o'er hanging
Shoulders shaped like granite boulders
They carried the ancient bow
Whose secret weight confounded
And made them halt for breath
Many a time.

Earth was glad
There was a shift
Of the weight on her back.
The great mountain of the North
Felt an uneasy rivalry.
World-space felt narrow
When ocean-like the crowds
With tumultuous noise
Came to watch
This trial at the mystic bow.

"Is this Mount Meru shaped into a bow
Meru with which the gods did churn
The ocean once upon a time?
Or is it the Serpent god
On whose head rests the Earth
Or is it the far off rainbow of heaven
Come down to earth in solid form?"

"Should a maiden's fate be hung on this?
Can any prince be ever found
To lift and bend this formidable thing,
Unless indeed a miracle be worked?
Alas, for the girl
Tied to this impossible pledge."

When thus the maidens talked annoyed
They placed the heavy bow on the ground
Which many a noble prince had scanned
And threw up his hands in utter despair,
So many saw but none did dare.

The King, he looked at the stalwart form
Of the beautiful prince from great Ayodhya
But then he looked at the terrible bow
Which seemed to hold his destined grief
And sadly he thought of his pledge-bound girl.

The King's good priest Sadanand spoke

Who understood his sovereign's grief:
"The Goddess Earth's resplendent form
Lies concealed from the eyes of men;
Her glory is seen in the golden harvest
That issues from the good plough-share.
But when our King he cut a furrow
In the holy field, Earth herself
Appeared as a child in golden glory;
And ocean's child Lakshmi herself
Twin companion of the drink of gods
Yields honoured place to our princess here
Sita of resplendent beauty."

Visvamitra made a sign
Whereat like the impetuous flame
That from the sacrificial fire
Rises to meet the falling *ghee*
Rama rose, and the gods above
Shouted in joy and the *rishis* below
Eagerly uttered benediction.

The charming prince he stood erect
But then before he reached the bow
That his holy guide desired him bend
The god of love he bent his bow
And a thousand shafts did pierce the hearts
Of a thousand maidens there assembled.

"Look at this bow intervening,
It is hard on this prince and on the maid,"
Said one,
"If our bashful Sita's beautiful hand
Should fail to win the loving grasp
Of this fair prince's broad brave hand
What is left for poor Sita's heart
But joyless years
To pine and die?"
Said another,

"If the King he wishes his girl to wed,
And such a prince has come to ask,
"Yes" should be the single word
And hands that instant sweetly joined.
Instead he's planned his own undoing
Foolishly placing this ancient bow
Between the princess and her joy."

While the maids thus whispered anxious words
The prince advanced with stately stride
More majestic than the steps of a lion
Or a coronation elephant.
Assembled elders chanted benisons
And the gods above that knew they cheered.

The bow forbidding was there out-stretched
Like a great mountain lying flat;
The prince extended he his hand
And seized it well.
Wonder of wonders !
Is it the bow indeed
Or is't a wreath of fragrant flowers,
He has so lightly raised
To put round Sita's neck?

They watched unwinking but could not tell
When he placed the bow
Firm against his foot,
Or when he strung it true and pulled.
They saw the prince he held it well,
They heard the thunder
Of its breaking !

The gods acclaimed and showered flowers
And from the clouds fell golden rain ;
The sea of thronging men they threw
Pearls and gems on the valiant prince ;
Assembled holy men they blessed
The King in his hour of greatest joy.

II

Rama and Sita are in the forest. They found themselves remarkably happy in the hut that adept Lakshmana built for them. The surroundings were beautiful and they so enjoyed the peace and beauty of forest life that they had no regrets for what they had left behind in Ayodhya, except that now and then Rama thought of his father and his heart sank. "I have done all I could to save his honour but how can I take away his great grief?" This thought was a telepathic reaction to what was then actually happening in Ayodhya.

Both Valmiki and Kamban leave the princes and Sita at this stage and go back to Ayodhya. Fast-going messengers were sent to Bharata. And Bharata received them and in response to the urgent call that the messengers conveyed, he left for Ayodhya not knowing what was waiting for him there. Then follow some of the tensest situations in the Ramayana. What can approach the exquisite pathos of the situation where the most innocent of men Bharata, has become the motive for the most cruel among wicked deeds ever recorded, *viz.*, the banishment of Rama, beloved of all, to the forests of Dandaka ? Bharata's meeting his mother Kaikeyi and the scene where the doubly-bereaved Kausalya, mother of Rama, receives Bharata at first with natural suspicion and a sense of distance, and then seeing his utter innocence completely breaks down—these scenes are painted with unrivalled beauty by Kamban.

The messengers carried the message
They went by the shortest route.
Day and night,
As fast as they could, they rode.
And when they reached the palace of the prince
They charged the men at the gate
At once to announce to the prince
That Dasaratha's men had come
And desired to be seen.

"Prince, men have come from the King, your father
Bearing a message for you", they said.
And up he rose to see them
For great was his eagerness
To hear from the King, his father.

"Is he well, the King, my lord?" cried he
Not waiting for them to speak.
"He's well", said they
And quieted his anxious heart.
"And is the dear Crown Prince well?"
"Yes", said they and he clasped his hands
In thankfulness and joy.

And after loving enquiries
About the rest, the envoys said
"Here is the royal epistle
May it please you take it,
Prince, whose beauty baffles the painters !"

He stood to receive the royal letter
And first he placed it on his head,
As if it were holy ashes
Received at a sacred shrine
And after, opened it to read.
Glad he was to be asked
To go to Ayodhya at once
For eager was the prince
To be with noble Rama again.

No time was lost
To find auspicious hour or day;
Car and convoy were ordered at once
His uncle's leave was taken
And he stood at the car
Calling for Satrughna
To hurry up.

Elephants and chariots
Troops and drums

All noisily gathered to march with the prince
To his native city.
Soft music played to send the prince away
The harmony was sweet to the ear;
And hymns of praise were lustily sung
Wishing the beloved prince
Safe journey and every joy.

Fast they sped seven days and nights,
Crossing hills and rivers
And after, reached Kosala
Famed for rich green fields and over-flowing
channels.

But what was this he saw?
The fields were lone
And no one at the plough,
And young men in the streets
Wore no flowers on their necks,
And Ayodhya's face
Was like a withered lotus.

The flutes of the city were still
And he did not hear the anklet-bells
Of happy dancing maids.
The balconies were empty
And the towers were left
Undecorated, bare.

"The faces I see
Have no laughter in them,
No incense issues from the houses I pass,
The maids I see have no flowers on their heads,
Unlighted are the house lamps."
"It seems I must prepare", he thought
"For some heavy news."

Straight he went to where the King must be
But found him not
"This is strange", he thought
And his brave big frame now trembled in fear.

Came hurrying a maid who rushed to him and said
"Your mother wants you come at once."

Mother and son were locked
In joyous embrace.
"Is father well?" she asked,
"The queens and my sisters?"

"Yes, yes", said the prince
"But tell me where the emperor is;
I long to kiss his lotus feet
I found him not where he must be."

The hard-hearted queen
Un-perturbed she spoke
"Son, summoned by the gods above
The King your father left us.
Like a conquering hero
He has joined the gods
Grieve not for this!"

Like a javelin sharp, these words
Pierced the prince's heart
And he fainted and fell.
His beautiful locks spread out
He lay on the ground
Like a tall tree blown down in a sudden storm.

Pale his lips, and his beautiful eyes
Streaming tears, he asked
"What have I heard from you my mother?
Fire cannot burn as your words have burnt!

"O father, how could you leave
Your people thus to grieve?
You destroyed of yore
The enemies of the gods.
Is it they still have foes
Whom to battle with?
Wherefore called they you again
O mighty shouldered warrior?"

Thus did he weep disconsolate
Like an orphaned child
And to the loving women around
He said, "Now let me go
To dear Rama and kiss his feet
Who now is father and lord
To fatherless me."

Whereat his mother compunctionless
Spoke these cruel words
"Brave prince, he whom you seek
To the forest he has gone
With his wife and brother."

The prince was dazed and utterly confused
"Well, let me hear", he said
"What more have you to tell?"
"Has Rama gone to the forest?
What was the crime
For which exile was ordained?
And how did the angry gods
Bring it about? Tell me all
How did the fates contrive?

"He could not have sinned
Except for some great good.
Tell me now was it after or before
My father's death?
Good mother! Do make things clear for me."

Said Kaikeyi, "My son!
It was not any deadly sin
Against guru or violent deed
Deliberate or accidental,
Even when the King was alive
Radiant like the sun himself
Rama went to live in the forest."

"Was he guiltless?
Did no enemies seize and carry him?

Did he do no un-intended deed
To bring this penance about ?
Then why when father was alive
Should a prince for penance go?
And how did the King die?
Tell me now and keep me
No longer in suspense."

"Son, listen now, I obtained from the King
A boon and made the kingdom yours,
And got the prince exiled
To make the kingdom safe for you.
Grieving for this the Emperor died."

Bharata's hands were on his ears
Not bearing to hear these cruel words;
His brows quivered, and his breath
Was like a furnace throwing flames
And his eyes spouted tears of blood.

Fierce was the prince's wrath
Against his evil mother
But he refrained from violent deed
For the vision of Rama rose
Before him sternly disapproving.

But he let go angry words;
"Your machination foul and wicked
Has killed my father and consigned
My noble brother to forest life;
And you boast to me this double achievement.
Yet I tear not your wicked mouth
And do you want me to complete
This plan abominable
By eagerly seizing my brother's crown?"

He lapsed silent, and sunk in thought:
"No, Dharma is not dead" he cried
"Dharma has survived wickedness.
For Ayodhya had a king who died

And a prince his heritage renounced
That the pledged word may still be honoured;
And if Bharata be mean enough
To profit thereby, blame we the times?

No, no, my crime shall be
My own misfortune
And not belong to the times
That produced Rama and my father."
He could no longer bear
To stay by the wicked mother
And left to find some consolation
At Queen Kausalya's blessed feet.

And when he saw the bereaved Queen
Grief overwhelmed him once again
He dropped like lead on the ground
And bathed her feet in tears.

"Mother dear!" he cried
"Your wretched son craves your blessing.
Oh where is my father gone?
And where is my great good brother?
Am I to face this ruin, alone?
Unfriended wretch am I indeed.

Could you not hold him back for me?
Were you all and your combined strength
Unequal to the power of Death?"
And like a stricken bird he fluttered
And rolled on the ground and wept.

"The evil woman that brought this about
The gods and her sin could have struck her dead.
But how can I ask for that when this thief
That is son of her body is not dead but alive—
Although his death would solve at once
This chaos and universal grief.

"Heaven's charioteer that drives
Darkness out of this world

Was father to this ancient royal clan
Came a scion of that house to be born
Bharata, another name for shame
O my mother, why was I born?"

Thus wept the prince unrivalled
In strength of limbs and spotless mind,
The twice bereaved queen
For a moment thought her exiled son beloved
Returned and stood before her.
She gathered Bharata up
And pressed him to her anguished bosom.

"Prince among princes
Bharata my son!" she cried
"In the long line of your great race
There was none so noble as you, my son!"
Moved was she to her depths as she thought
And thought again of all he had said.

III

Bharata's passion had for the time subsided. And the people and princes and elders, led by the Sage Vasishta, called upon the good prince to accept the crown and undertake the governance of the State. Bharata had no difficulty in convincing the wise men that what they proposed was fundamentally wrong. He proposed a better solution which was acclaimed with universal approbation. Bharata's self-reproach and humility are beautifully brought out by Kamban. Unfortunately, it is not possible to reproduce in a translation the exquisite art of the poet. I must point this out not only in introducing this particular chapter of Kamban but in respect of the whole of my effort in the direction of illustratively presenting Kamban to non-Tamil-knowing people, and indeed in respect of all translations of poetry by the ablest among us from one language to another. Let me quote William Cowper who wrote in one of his beautiful letters: "There are minutae in every language which transferred into another will spoil the version. Such extreme fidelity is in fact unfaithful."

But what is one to do who does not wish to impose on the public and palm off one's own bad composition as a rendering of Kamban? All one can do is to avoid pitfalls and be as faithful as possible where he can do so without damage to the purpose. In another letter the same poet wrote: "There is something in his style that touches me exceedingly and which I do not know how to describe. This property of it which depends perhaps altogether upon the arrangement of his words and the modulation of his sentences, it would be very difficult to preserve in a translation."

Yet another quotation from Cowper dealing with the difficulty of satisfactory translation. "It cost me all the morning yesterday and all the evening to translate a single simile to my mind. The transitions from one member of the subject

to another, though easy and natural in the Greek, turn out often so intolerably awkward in an English version that almost endless labour and no little address are requisite to give them grace and elegance." I must say that I have gone through many occasions of this kind especially where Kamban in the midst of the human narrative suddenly and with exquisite beauty reminds his readers of the fact that Rama was God incarnate.

When the sad people of the City learnt
That Kaikeyi's son was disconsolate
They had a consultation hurried
And a general council was summoned at once
Of ministers of State and citizen leaders,
Army captains and provincial chiefs,
Family priests and bearded elders;
And round the handsome prince they sat
Each in his appointed place.

When all were ready the good Sumantra
Turned to Vasishta who understood.
Spoke he then to the prince these words:
"Son of Dasaratha ! your duty is clear,
The people need a protecting hand,
And now there can be no other choice.
The sharp sword and strong hand
Of the king is like the sun during day
And the moon and shining stars at night,
Without which all would be dark and confused.

"Learned and pious elders all,
Kings and grey-haired men assembled
Desire that you do take the chair of State
For due maintenance of law
And eternal dharma as in the days
Of your great father gone to Heaven.

"Disintegration awaits the State
That has no king that rules
Even like the body bereft of the spirit
That from within governs.

No society, be it of gods
Or of the enemies of good,
No world of any sort or kind
Can hold without a protecting king.

"And if we look about us well
Here on earth or in the heavens,
The unending number of things that move
Or which seem to move or live,
Maintained are they all by order and rule.

"The King your father is dead, and Rama
Eldest born has renounced and gone.
The mantle has fallen on you unsought
By the King's boon your mother had earned.
This State must needs be ruled, O Prince!
This is our well-considered counsel;
It is for you to save the people;
In you alone, Prince, lies their hope."

The sage's words were charged
With deep emotion, but the prince
Trembled as one to whom a poison cup
Was given to drink and die.
Broad-shouldered brave Bharata's heart
Throbbed like a woman's heart excited.
Everything swam before his eyes
But he gathered himself and spoke:

"When the peerless prince my brother
Dasaratha's eldest son is living
You counsel me to wear the crown!
Revered sires, if this be Dharma,
As it must be when you say it,
Then who can blame my mother now?
Her deed would stand approved by you.

"Experienced in the affairs of kings,
Tell me whether in the history of states
From the earliest days of yore till now,

Was any younger son ever called
To govern the land when the elder was alive ?

"It would be a shame, honoured men,
I cannot do it as you desire:
Go I must to the forest at once,
And bring Rama back from exile
And see him duly installed as King.
Else understand I'm firmly resolved
To spend my years in the forest too;
Or else, reverend sires, I die!"

Whereat there was acclaim
Loud and universal:
"Noble Prince, you need no crown
Nor deeds nor sacrifices religious.
The fourteen worlds may disappear
Your glory shall be
For ever and ever !"

Said Bharata then to his brother there
"Satrughna dear! Let the trumpet sound
And be it proclaimed that Bharata goes
To bring the King
Home to Ayodhya again!
Let a great army prepare
At once to march with me."

And when the proclamation was made
With tumultuous cheers it was received.
The dead city came to life
And gloom and grief gave place to joy.

Before morn next day the troops were ready,
And the noise was like the roar of the sea.
Kaikeyi's foolish dream was shattered
And nothing remained of it to hope.
And great Ayodhya rejoiced
As if she'd never grieved
But rose from an ugly dream.

The army marched along
Chariots and horses and mighty elephants
But Bharata walked;
"My lord the big brother has shown the way"
Said Bharata, and on foot he went.

IV

Kamban looks upon Rama as God incarnate. The worship is unqualified. But the poet's heart is obviously given away to two other men in the Ramayana, Guha and Bharata. Bharata is Kamban's supreme ideal. And Guha is his paragon of loyalty and I think in that respect he beats Lakshmana. Kamban closely follows Valmiki everywhere with great care and even where in some places with remarkable understanding and skill he deviates, the exception truly proves the rule. But he lets himself go freely with Guha, round whom his great poetic imagination plays with wonderful effect and orginality. There must have been a popular long-standing tradition about Guha which Valmiki recognised and wove into his epic, but did not deal with that character as fully as he himself perhaps had intended. But Kamban has done full justice and, so to say, fulfilled Valmiki's intention. In dealing with Guha, the poet thinks and speaks through him. The devotees of Kamban may well look upon Kamban as an incarnation of Guha.

The prince and his army marched
Through country waving with corn
Watered by holy Kaveri,
And reached the forest bank of Ganga.
The prince's plight drew pity
From man and bird and beast
And even from the rooted trees.

Behind the brave and blameless prince
That walked to seek his exiled brother
Marched a huge full-limbed force
And Guha watched from the other bank.
"This must be a force led by Bharata
Against the exiled prince" thought he.

His anger rose and the river-king
Was a rugged man and fierce when angered;
He laughed in scorn and his eyes shot fire,
His nostrils swelled and eye-brows quivered,
Red were his eyes and sharp his words,
He bit his lips and buckled his sword.
He sounded the bugle and shook his *tudi*
To warn his tribe to look out for battle
And his big shoulders swelled
At the scent of war.

Hearing his call, the forest men
Armed and gathered on the southern bank.
Huge was the swell of fighting men
That stood behind Guha ready for war.

"Brave denizens of the forest,
The wicked host on the bank across
Let us make a gift of them
To the gods today and reinstal
The exiled prince in his rightful place."

"Let us see how they will cross
This wide river's rolling flood.
Bowmen brave! will you quake?
Or will you smash that army there
Elephants and horses all?

"The honour of our tribe is at stake.
'Friend' he called me, my brothers,
And he must see
His friend is brave and minds not death."

"This wicked prince, disloyal man
He may not love his elder brother,
He may not fear the younger tiger prince;
But dare he come across the border
When I am here to guard my friend?
Let us prove today, my brothers,
Woodmen's shafts can pierce even princes' bodies."

"My lord he gave them
All the lands and waters that belonged to him.
Will they deny him
Even the forest here
Which to us belongs?
Down with that army,
Waving flags and all !
Rama will come back to his own
By your courage, my men
And your well-aimed shafts."

Thus he said to his iron men
And stood long bow in hand
High shouldered friend of Rama
Guha on the river bank across.
Sumantra on the northern bank
Saw Guha and knew him well.
To the prince he ran and said
"See there gallant Guha
Lord of the river!

"Numberless boats he commands
And an immense army of forest men
Splendid bowmen all
His name is Guha
Dearest friend of Rama.
This man of granite strength
And loyalty limitless
Dark and brave of form
He is waiting on the road
To give you worthy welcome."

The prince of spotless mind
Was joyed to hear this said:
"Is he the friend who did embrace
My banished brother and solaced him?
When he did sadly walk in the forest wild?
Then I must hasten forward
Before he arrives here
And tender him my gratitude."

Impatient with love
Bharata with his brother
Went to the river bank and stood.
The forest chieftain saw
From where he stood afar
And was amazed !

Down fell the bow from his hand
As he saw the figure
Clad in bark like an anchorite,
With face sorrow-laden
A sight to melt the stoniest heart,
Beautiful but pale like the moon
Riding the day-light sky.

And Guha said to himself
"The prince is so like dear Lord Rama,
And he who stands beside him too
Is a very likeness of beloved Lakshmana.
It seems this prince is lamenting
And has upon him the habit of hermits."

"He salutes Rama
Turning to where he must be
Even without seeing him.
O ! was I not wrong to think
That any brother of my Rama
Could ever do a thing so mean?"

He told his men what he thought;
And asking them to be wary
He himself took a boat
And went across to salute the prince.

Bharata stood with palms joined;
And when Guha bowed obeisance,
The prince before whom
The very gods were humble
He felt at Guha's feet,

For this was the man who sweet solace gave
To Rama whom his own mother had wronged.

And the forest chieftain
Lifted him up with love
Greater than a father's love
And clasped him to his rugged bosom,
Guha, most worthy of men,
Who has found a place
In the hearts of pious mortals
Through the ages since Rama's time.

Asked Guha,
"Prince of mighty frame,
What is your mission?"
Said Bharata in answer:
"My father that ruled an empire
Deflected the course of ancient custom.
I have come to set that right
And take the King home to the city."

The wild men's chief who heard these words
Burst into tears of joy.
Down he fell on the ground again
And locked Bharata's beautiful feet
In his rough hands and wept.

"The kingdom of the world was yours
Which at your mother's desire
Your father gave to you.
You refused to touch the gift
Avoiding it as an evil thing.
Grief is in your face
Like a great river dammed.
Admirable soul, your greatness is more
Than a thousand Ramas, believe me, prince."

"What is a poor hunter's praise?
Like the Sun who makes pale all other lights,
The glories of your glorious race

You have made into one great glory of yours,
Mighty-armed mighty-souled
Prince unrivalled!"

Asked Bharata:
"Guha, dear tell me where
My brother rested here with you?"
Said the *Nishada* "Go with me
I'll take you to the holy spot."
Bharata saw the stone with the grass thereon spread
On which the Prince of Ayodhya slept.

Bharata could not bear the sight
And his tears bathed the ground
As he knelt on earth:
"For me was all this suffered by you;
Roots and half-cooked fruits you ate;
The grass was your bed, beloved Rama,
And I do live and the golden crown
I am told must duly adorn my head
And wealth and luxury heaped on me!"

"Show me the place where Lakshmana slept",
Asked simple-hearted Bharata again,
Wanting to kiss the holy spot.
And Guha answered, "Beloved prince,
When on the hard stone Rama slept
And Sita too did lay herself
Down on that cruel bed,
Lakshmana could not bear the sight.
His eyes filled with tears
And all night long bow in hand
He stood awake watching around
Lest any wild forest-beast hurt them."

V

The meeting of Rama and Bharata is for the pious Hindu a great chapter in the Ramayana. The Hindu way of life is fixed for ever in this episode such as no painting and no marble can contain. No wonder that this is the scene that figures most prominently in the festivals of Upper India where the Rama legend is, one many say, even more popular and deep-rooted than in the South. This chapter of Kamban has some of his most exquisitely beautiful verses.

In this scene, Ayodhya has her revenge on the forest. The city and the palace are all gathered at Chitrakuta around Rama and the forest is converted into a busy city. This great reunion at Chitrakuta made a turning point in Rama's forest life. After the *Milap,* he could not bear to continue in that happy place to which memories of the reunion got attached, memories of mother, brothers and beloved elders—in fact, the Ayodhya atmosphere. So he leaves Chitrakuta and goes away to the interior of Dandaka where there would be no memory of the past and where the gods had decided to enact the great tragedy.

Bharata reached the hermitage
Of holy Bharadwaja
His heart hungering for love
And his troubled mind for advice:
The Sage's face it shone benignant
The picture of Siva himself with the crescent moon
Quivering in his hermit crown of matted hair.

He blessed the prince from Ayodhya and said
"Undying glory to you my son,
The golden crown is yours
The kingdom awaits your rule.
Then why this hermit's habit
And why glue-twisted locks for a crown?"

The poignant words hurt like a stab.
Indignant rose the prince, his face
Aflame with the wrath of innocence.
He gasped for breath; then, "Sire!" said he
"These your words I've not deserved;
Befit they your holy mouth?"

"Forgive me revered father", he said
"Never can I touch what belongs me not.
The kingdom is Rama's by ancient rule
And if he does not rule as he should
The years may roll but my abode
Shall surely be the forest here."

The holy men that heard these words,
Bharadwaja and others with him
Were beside themselves for joy to see
The youthful prince by love had achieved
What sages by penance struggled to attain,
True *sanyas* and self-command.

Lovingly Bharadwaja led
The resolute prince to his hermitage.
And there was a feast that day in the forest
Served by the gods as the sage desired—
For angels obey when hermits command—
To the prince's troops and the citizen crowd.
Men and women ate and drank
Till everyone was in a trance
Transported to another world.

Something is happening, Lakshmana thought,
And up a steep hill he climbed and saw.
Bowmen and horses!
An army was coming!
Down he leaped and ran to his brother.

"Brother", said he, "an army's on us
Led by Bharata newly installed,

Foolish pride has made him blind
To your strength and mine, well, well !"

And saying this he rushed to the hut
And returned full panoplied
With bow in hand and quiver strapped
Wanting orders ready for battle
Against the impious usurping brother.

"See you now, my brother !
Alone, shall I defend you against this wretch
Who stands detested here below,
And whom the gods above abhor.
I shall smite him and his power today
And you will rejoice in your little brother;
Our wrongs shall be avenged today.

"The ground shall be covered with the bodies of men
Horses and elephants shall be dead,
And a red river flow down the woods.
The devils will feast and dance with joy
Over the carcasses I shall make,
And they and the gods together will celebrate
Your restoration to the throne.

"You will see my might today undo
The wrong that was wrought on the world by a king
Whose foolish fondness for a wife
Led this usurping brother to the throne.
In your disconsolate mother's grief
Kaikeyi found her wicked joy:
Loud shall be her lamentation
Learning the event of the battle today."

Rama let his brother talk
For he knew his love
And the angry anguish of his heart.
"Lakshmana dear, do I not know
The might of your arm and the power of your bow?

"But listen now, how can you think
A brother in whom flows the blood
Of our long line of honoured kings
Can do a deed so foul as you fear?
Your love for me has warped your judgment.

"Did we not ever find our brother
The embodiment of all that is good
The very image of Dharma itself?
The Vedas could go wrong, not he!
Proud were we of Bharata
Strong-armed but ever just.
Shall we suspect sin in him
Whom we both knew well to be
The axle-tree of righteousness?

"O Lakshmana dear, do not this wrong
The very thought would be a sin.
Bharata comes but to see me sure
Impelled by love and not for greed
As you will see when he arrives."

Thus spoke Rama in kindly tones
And almost then stood before them,
Bharata ; for ordering the army
To stay behind, he had hurried forward.
O the sight! Is it the brother
Or Grief herself in human form?

Emaciated, with tear-flooded eyes,
Distraught, clasped hands raised overhead,
Innocence herself begging forgiveness,
Rama saw this figure of sadness
And gravely turning to Lakshmana said,
"See you the enemy whose army you thought
To smite and utterly destroy?"

Lakshmana was pale with shame and grief.
Down dropped the bow from his hand;
The tears streamed from his eyes.

And Bharata spoke:
"What have you done, my lord and brother?
Cruel to me and pitiless,
You left your post of inviolable duty,
Allowed the rule of ancient custom
To be deflected from its course."

This stern impeachment done
His strength did fail
For now, he saw
The dear dead father in Rama!
He fell prostrate and the anguish of his heart
His eyes poured
On Rama's lotus feet.

And Rama's tears came then in a flood
Bathing Bharata's anchorite hair
Like Ganga entering Siva's head.
He lifted him up
And hugged him to his heart.
Like two gods they stood
Compassion and Innocence
Locked in embrace.

Then Rama eyed him up and down
His hermit clothes and his wasted form:
He thought many things and thought
Of those he had left behind.
Gently he spoke: "My brother,
How is the King our father?
I trust his shoulders are as strong as ever?"

Whereat Bharata said:
"Oh my brother! Father is dead!
Death came to him in the shape
Of the cruel woman that gave me birth.
In the grief of your parting he languished and died:
Truth and body he left behind
And joined the gods to whom he belonged."

At these words that pierced his heart
Rama reeled like as one
Once wounded pierced in the wound again.
He fell and rolled on the ground:
Yes, even he that was God Himself
And he wept like a child long and loud.

"O votive lamp, that burnt so long!
Art thou extinguished now?
O King that was father to your people,
Compassion's stronghold,
Have you left us for ever?

"Father, art thou gone? then to whom
Shall we turn for truth's exemplar,
O lion among the kings of the world?

"O Battle-worn King!
By prayers and sacrifices rare
You found a son, Ah me!
Who brought you nought
But grief and death.
The prince he tells me
You languished for me and died.
But here I am holding life
Precious even when you are gone.

"Gone with you is largesse,
Gone is honour
And valour that the gods may envy!
Gone is even-handed justice,
Truth unswerving,
Gone with you is royal sway
Kindlier than the rays of the moon."

Thus did Rama lament
And roll on the ground
And those around him
Tried to soothe his grief.

Vasishta spoke: "Know you not, prince
If men are born they must also die.
And man's sole companions
Are what he renounces and his works?
You should not grieve, you that know."

"Countless are births and countless are deaths
And in between, vain illusions,
Attachments born of pain and pleasure.
Pitiless death makes no distinction.
When even the yet unborn
Are claimed by Death in the womb,
Must you grieve for one who is gone
Ripe in age after a well-filled life?

"Dasaratha ruled for long
And blameless was the rule
Like spotless chastity;
It is not meet we grieve:
The King your father
Lived full and well.
Happy is he with the gods.
As all our people do
May your beautiful hands, my princes,
Offer oblations to the dead."

And so the prince of Ayodhya
Plunged in the river and there standing,
Thrice out of his hands
Reverently offered oblations to the dead
According to ancient custom.

Proceeded they to the hermitage
And before they reached,
Came out from the lone hut, Sita.
And when Bharata saw her,
The princess from whom great palaces
Drew greater beauty when she dwelt in them,
He covered his eyes with his hands
And fell at her feet weeping.

And Rama tenderly took him up
And clasping him in embrace,
He turned to Sita and said
"Princess, know the King is dead
He could not bear the anguish
Of my unfortunate separation
And Bharata has come to tell us."

She shook at the words
Her beautiful eyes melted
Into a flood of tears.
She dropped to the ground and placed her arm
On her mother Earth and wept.

Sprightly had been her steps
As she walked the woods.
In the forest she lived and laughed
As in the city palace;
So far grief lay utterly defeated.
But when she heard
The great King was dead
And Bharata bore the message sad,
Grief triumphed indeed
And drowned the beautiful swan.
She was led to the river and she too did
Last offices to the departed King.

Then Sumantra arrived
Who with the rest had stayed behind
Bringing with him the bereaved queens
And the trusty charioteer
Saluted the princes.

At the sight of the Queens
Burst Rama's grief again.
"What have you all done with my father?" he cried
And from his grief-red eyes
Flowed tears that bathed their feet.
Thus wept like a child, even He
From whom issued the Creator himself.

There was lamentation loud
And hearts melted like wax in the fire
As the queens hugged Sita
To their breasts and cried,
Struggling for breath
In their sea of grief.

Then came a great crowd
For the army arrived
And all who accompanied.
They saw their dear prince again,
And did not know
Whether it was joy or grief,
So confused were they.

And the sun then dipped in the western ocean
For was he not the head of the house
That mourned for the King that was dead,
The ancient house that the Lord chose
For Himself to appear on earth?

* * *

Nobles and holy men
And captains of the army
Sat round the prince
And his brothers three
When Rama gently spoke
Assuaging Bharata's anguish:

"Our father the King is dead
And by his firm command
The kingdom now is yours.
Instead of wearing a crown
Why these habiliments of an anchorite?
Tell me now."

Then rose Bharata
Quivering with emotion.
His reverent hands were clasped
As he faced his elder brother:

"Pre-eminent custodian of Dharma!
Was it right for you
Thus to leave your post of duty?
Great was the error our father did;
Infamous the wrong my mother wrought.
Come back and be installed, my brother!
And help to wipe out these horrid stains
Of error and wickedness.
Deny not, brother, who art father too."

Moved was Rama and he saw
Full well his spotless brother's anguish of mind.
"Brave brother, listen. It would be wrong
For sons to cast the father and mother
That gave them birth to eternal shame.
Our duty lies, let us remember,
In making glorious what they did."

"So, my brother, I am bound to do
The King's behest; now argue not,
And these few years, be regent on my behalf
And rule on my commission."

"Brother dear, it shall be so"
The spotless prince agreed.
"But be sure twice seven years hence
To return and relieve your deputy;
Failing which O Rama, I swear
Fire shall right this infamous wrong!
All purifying fire
Shall that day bathe your brother
For whom all this wrong was done."

Rama was overwhelmed with joy
Bharata's anguish of heart was gone.
"Brother, so shall it be", said Rama
Whose greatness was greater
Than all his wide-repeated praises.

"Fourteen years" said Bharata sobbing,
And grieved that that must be;
"I ask you a blessing brother", he said
"Give me the sandals you are wearing."

And Rama took them off and gave
What hold the power to give
All the good that man may want,
The dust of Rama's feet.

"My crown!" he said as on his head
He placed the precious gift
And tears rolled down his noble face.
Then flat on the ground he fell
In humble salutation,
And he rose with the dust all over;
Like the golden image of a god,
He looked more beautiful than ever.

The city had filled the silent forest
And now it was time to depart.
The mothers sadly returned
And so the women accompanying.
And all the holy men departed;
And the troops marched back
With the city-crowd behind.
And following them,
Sadly went the Sage Vasishta.

As the great crowd cleared
And the forest resumed its peace,
The gods above that had come to watch
Returned to their blessed abode,
But the last to go with lingering steps
Was good Guha the boat-man chief.